

John Kirby And His Sextet

Vol.1

**Charlie Shavers
Buster Bailey
Russell Procope
Billy Kyle
John Kirby
O'Neil Spencer**



John Kirby And His Sextet


"The Complete Associated
Transcriptions", Vol.1 1941

Personnel:

Charlie Shavers (tp, arr.), Buster Bailey (cl),
Russell Procope (as), Billy Kyle (p, arr.),
John Kirby (b, arr.), O'Neil Spencer (dr), Lou Singer (arr.).
Recorded in New York,
May 19, 1941 - 2:00 pm-5: 00 pm (tracks 1-17)
and September 26, 1941 - 1:30 pm -4:30 pm (tracks 18-21).



1. **Little Brown Jug** 2:43
(J. Winner) arr. LS
2. **Close Shave** 2:36
(C. Shavers) arr. CS
3. **Mr. Haydn Gets Hep** 2:08
(C. Shavers) arr. LS
4. **Tweed Me Down** 2:38
(B. Kyle) arr. BK
5. **Temptation** 4:01
(N. H. Brown)
6. **Rehearsin' For A
Nervous Breakdown** 3:37
(C. Shavers) arr. CS
7. **Echoes Of Harlem** 3:55
(Ellington)
8. **Then I'll Be Happy** 3:20
(L. Brown-S. Clare-C. Friend)
9. **Chloe** 2:33
(N. Moret)
10. **By The Waters Of
Minnetonka** 2:47
(Thurlow-Lieurante)
11. **Ebony Rhapsody** 2:44
(Liszt)
12. **Serenade** 2:24
(F. Schubert) arr. LS
13. **Fantasy In Blue (Theme)** 1:51
(L. Singer)
14. **Arabian Nightmare** 1:54
(R. Korsakov) arr. LS
15. **The Kerry Dance** 2:08
(J. L. Mollroy) arr. LS
16. **Original Dixieland
One-Step** 2:24
(Nick La Rocca)
17. **Minute Waltz** 2:02
(F. Chopin)
18. **Cutting The Campus** 3:16
(C. Shavers) arr. CS
19. **Rhumba In The Dark** 3:14
(arr. CS)
20. **Lolly Gaggig** 2:47
(arr. CS)
21. **Move Over** 2:48
(C. Shavers) (arr. CS)

AAD - Total time: 64:45
Notes: John McDonough.
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The John Kirby Story Vol. 1

In the 1940s the famous phrase you all know—"15 minutes of fame"—had not yet been coined. It wasn't until two decades later that Andy Warhol so neatly put the intoxication of celebrity into proper prosaic perspective. But by declaring that fame is every person's momentary birthright, he attached by implication a philosophic warning and disclaimer. To wit: like one's first love, it is a highly abnormal state of being, and one never to be taken personally, seriously or with any expectation of permanence. What he didn't say was that it's also addictive.

In any case, the warning came too late for John Kirby, who, once blessed, could not be content to let it pass once his singular musical formula had lost its power of startle, its audience. From 1940 through 1944 Down Beat readers voted the Kirby Sextet the best small jazz group in America after the Benny Goodman Sextet—in 1941 by a only a thin 150 vote margin out of a combined total of nearly 5,000 votes. Kirby was not only recording for Columbia. He became the first and only black band ever to have a sponsored network radio program, "Flow Gently Sweet rhythm" on CBS. Things couldn't have been better.

By 1946, though, the original group had broken up, the vote totals were barely in the hundreds, and Kirby, who had left his definitive work at Decca, Columbia and Victor, was reduced to a few ad hoc dates for small labels like Asch, Crown and Disc. He never recorded again after 1946.

On December 22, 1950, a Harlem businessman named Norman McKnight brokered a reunion of the band at Carnegie Hall. It turned out to be a grim Christmas present for Kirby, who played two short sets on a oddball program that included Juanita Hall, the Orioles, and the De Paris brothers. The house was 90 percent empty. Although Leonard Feather wrote that "the actual Kirby moments were a musical as well as a nostalgic delight...the rest of the evening was dank and dark." He called it a "wake."

A year and a half later, June 14, 1952, Kirby was dead in Hollywood of a heart attack aggravated by diabetes. He was 43, an age at which most men find the arcs of emotional maturity and physical stamina meeting at an optimal point. "The news of [his] death...was not merely sad," Feather wrote in Down Beat. "It had a pitiful quality in its finality. It made you feel that there was nothing left for Kirby but to die. For one

of the cruellest aspects of show business is that when you have scaled the heights, there is no way for you to go but down, and the descent is even harder ad more depressing than the way up." Feather seemed to sound the keynote for all considerations of Kirby to come.

In 1955 Feather brought Charlie Shavers, Buster Bailey, Billy Kyle and Russell Procope together in a reunion record date for Jazztone. But unfortunately studio time was too short to rekindle much of the old ensemble velocity, and the band served mostly as a backup group for a series of Anglo-Saxon ballads by Maxine Sullivan.

The music on this trilogy of CD's catches the band at its peak in 1941 and follows it along to the threshold of its decline when personnel changes began to undo one of the most particular sounds in jazz history. It brings together all the issued Kirby takes from a series of non-commercial recordings the band made for Associated Transcriptions from 1941 to 1944.

The Associated story is an interesting and little known one, I think. So let me defer further history of the Kirby group to other volumes in the series, and talk about a small sidebar to these sides. Associated began as Associated Music Publishers, a holding company in the 1920s made up of various European publishers who specialized mostly in classical material and who were not associated with ASCAP. It was organized by Paul Heinecke, who had represented many of these companies in the United States. In 1929 he sold Associated to a company called Wired Radio for \$250,000, and then went on in 1931 to set up the Society of European Stage Authors and Composers, better known as SESAC.

As for Wired Radio, it had its origins in 1922 when a former army signal corps officer had a rather intriguing idea for transmitting radio programs that, in a way, anticipated today's cable television. Rather than depend on temperamental AM radio signals over the air, he reasoned, wouldn't it be better to piggyback radio on electric power lines and let them carry it directly into the home. On that simple premise, a public utility company called North American snapped up the patent and formed a subsidiary called Wired Radio, which later bought Associated from Heinecke. It achieved some momentum in Europe. But in American by the depression the AM system was securely established, and any kind of wire or cable radio system seemed a dead issue.

It was resurrected in 1934, though, when the Muzak Corporation was formed as yet another a division of Wired Radio. Muzak had early ambitions to become a kind fourth network and compete with NBC, CBS and Mutual. But when the FCC blocked it in 1938, it turned instead to piping in assorted atmospheric music by wire to subscribing businesses and offices. Accordingly, it set up a library service of transcribed music under the label Associated Music Publishers (AMP) Transcriptions. Muzak's New York AMP operations were headed by bandleader Ben Selvin, who naturally looked to the music catalogue of his sister company, Associated Music Publishers for material.

Late in 1940 when the networks faced a showdown with ASCAP over licensing fees. The networks hurriedly set up an alternate licensing company called Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) and began building its own catalogue by buying up non-ASCAP publishing companies. Associated became one of its first buyouts.

When the Kirby band made its first transcription sides for Associated/Muzak in May and September 1941, the war over licensing fees between the radio networks and ASCAP was at its peak. So no ASCAP music could be performed over network radio or any of its affiliates. Famous bandleaders like Glenn Miller and Duke Ellington had to substitute "Slumber Song" and "Sepia Panorama" for their familiar theme songs. Under the circumstances, both Associated, which was owned by BMI, and Kirby, who had a CBS network radio program, had a strong mutual incentive to avoid trafficking in ASCAP music.

"Our policy of adapting the classics," Russell Procope told Michael Brooks in Brooks' album note for a 1976 collection of Kirby's Columbia work, "came about when they had that ASCAP strike. We couldn't play any ASCAP material, so we resorted to the classics, which were public domain. All the writers used to get the classics and make new arrangements just to see how we could play them. Well, we played 'em."

Yes, but Procope fails to mention that this was a well-pummelled path long before Kirby began to walk it. Everybody knows that Paul Whiteman and Tommy Dorsey had made Rimsky Korsakov's "Song of India" a pop classic in the '20s and '30s. Larry Clinton had "Town Tattler" from Bizet. Freddy Martin played Tchaikovsky as a theme. And Clinton and Benny Goodman each had their fun with Bach.

But when it comes to novelty small band music in this genre, the real precursor

is Raymond Scott. Scott didn't actually scavenge the classics. But like Reginald Foresythe before him, he wrote in such a quirky, self-consciously visionary manner that his work had the sense of coming from, well, some place else. The Kirby band, on its face, is comparable to Scott's in its formalism. And Gunther Schuler reminds us that Scott's "In An 18th Century Drawing Room" was directly answered by Kirby's "In a 20th Century Closet." Furthermore, when Shavers left Kirby, it was to join the CBS radio staff. He was among the first black musicians to be hired by a network and the occasion was hailed at the time as a breakthrough in racial integration. By either coincidence or irony, though, it put him under the baton of none other than Raymond Scott.

Nevertheless, comparisons with Scott may be facile, but they don't tell us very much, because Scott's music was mechanical, almost academic, whereas Kirby added heat and genuine swing to the mix that made him a genre unto himself. The band played a repertoire of classical and riff based originals and folk tunes. Whether it did so to side step the ASCAP problem, as Procope says, is beside the point. One suspects that Kirby's men took offbeat material on its merits wherever they found it. In any case, by the time all the differences with the networks had been settled by the end of 1941, the Kirby band had acquired a signature it would never escape.

1941 may have been the band's busiest year. Columbia and later RCA were recording its commercial discs, and MCA, the most powerful booking agency in the country, was routing its brief tours. But mostly it was based in New York City. In May when the first 17 Associated sides on this CD were recorded, the band was settled into Barney Josephson's Cafe Society Uptown. Only a week before it had played its first gig at Carnegie Hall, where Josephson, with production help from Leonard Feather, had gathered all his Cafe Society regulars together for a much-publicized concert. In addition to Kirby, there was "Helena" Horne, Art Tatum, Red Allen and his band, Eddie South, Hazel Scott, Pete Johnson and Albert Ammons.

The Music

"Little Brown Jug" is a good case study in the variety of devices that permitted Kirby to get so much from so little. There is a tight, jaunty, often aggressive drive, use of minor key interludes for transitions (Bailey's second solo), and a terrific sense of dynamics. Rather than put the pedal to the floor at the end, for instance, the band elects to retard and come in for a soft landing. Kirby had recorded "Little Brown Jug" for Vocalion in October 1939.

Charlie Shavers's "Close Shave" is a simple riff in which the second chorus becomes an ensemble solo line rather than an individual one. The actual solos are little more than break points between the tight ensemble variations. Two months after this version, the band would record it for Victor.

"Mr. Haydn Gets Hep" and "Tweed Me Down" were never made commercially. The first is a swing parody on the baroque in which the naturally staccato attacks of Shavers and Bailey serve the material well. The second is a Billy Kyle chamber piece of the first order.

"Temptation" is a pseudo exotic but genuinely lugubrious lament from 1933 introduced by Bing Crosby in his only MGM film, "Going Hollywood. The band is appropriately doleful and melancholy.

The jittery and anxious "Rehearsin' for a Nervous Breakdown" reprises the band first session for Decca in October 1938. High-speed precision is no obstacle for this sextet. The closing riff after O'Neill Spencer's imaginative drum solo comes bursting out at us and is one of the great closings in small group jazz, one that gets a strong lift of extra excitement from a subtle modulation.

Rather than offer an alternative voice, Shavers stays close to Cootie Williams's concept on Ellington's "Echos of Harlem." Procope, of course, would soon become an Ellingtonian, so his credentials are unimpeachable.

From 1926 and 1927 come "Then I'll Be Happy," which swings ingeniously as it never had before (save for the Kirby Columbia disc a year before) at mid tempo; and "Chloe," whose slightly exotic mood Kirby neatly deconstructs and swings. Another oldie, published in 1914 and popularized in 1921, and calculated to evoke the primitive is "By the Waters of Minnetonka," which flies like a flaming arrow in this version. It was one of the charts Kirby recorded on his original Decca session.

Kirby has better luck with Liszt than Ellington did with "Ebony Rhapsody." But of course, Ellington had to cope with a stereotypical Jim Crow lyric by Sam Coslow. Kirby, once past the first chorus, which is stubbornly resistant to any sense of motion, makes it dance. It's the first of a series of classical adaptations. Procope is extremely lyrical on "Serenade" by Schubert. "Fantasy in Blue" seems to have neither classical nor blues roots (it's a 32 bar tune with standard release), but is eminently Ellingtonian. Korsakov's "Arabian Nightmare" is another exercise in the exotic, and brakes lose only briefly—too briefly—and reminds us that we can never be too sure with Kirby where seriousness ends and when—or if—satire begins.

A nice folk tune is "Kerry Dance," previously explored by Larry Clinton in 1938. But when it comes to transforming remakes, few come close to the sleek Art Deco streamlining "Original Dixieland One Step" gets here compared to the aboriginal recording of 1917 by the ODJB. You can say the same about the Kirby recomposition of the fleet "Minute Waltz," previously done two years before for Vocalion.

Not long after this May 17 transcription session, the band went out on a brief tour in the northeastern area, then returned to New York to settle into an extended date at the Monte Carlo Beach Club. It was during this engagement that the second Associated date was done on September 26. So this CD ends with its beginning.

There was an abundance of originals in the book now; a circumstance forced to a degree by the continued ASCAP boycott of the radio networks. "Cutting the Campus" is a bright, relatively melodic piece by Shavers. "Rhumba in the Dark" reflects the incursion of Latin music into the American mainstream, still another consequence of the ASCAP standoff. In seeking new, non-ASCAP sources of music, BMI looked south. The result was the sudden arrival of such standards of the period as "Amopola," "Green Eyes," "Perfidia" and many more, which together made it essential that every band a rumba or conga in its book.

"Lolly Gaggling" and "Move Over" are a pair of elegant moderate swingers, with Shavers and Procope splitting an especially good chorus in the former. "Move Over" is a smooth riff piece that glides from the first bar. Sometimes the riffs are so reserved they seem like background for a soloist not there.

John McDonough
Down Beat, The Wall Street Journal



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